



Social Capital in Boston: Findings from the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey

Summary Report
2001



The Boston Foundation

What is the Boston Foundation?

One of the oldest and largest community foundations in the United States, founded in 1915, with current assets totaling more than \$645 million

About Community Foundations

First created in 1914, today there are more than 600 community foundations nationally, contributing close to \$1.6 billion every year to nonprofit organizations. Each is made up of funds that are established by many different donors, then pooled and invested together. The result is a permanent resource for the community with the flexibility to respond to changing times. Community foundations are governed by boards made up of civic leaders who approve grants and act as stewards of the funds.

A major funder

Making close to \$50 million annually in grants to nonprofit organizations that address community needs

A flexible giving vehicle for donors

With some 650 separate funds established for the general benefit of the community and for special purposes

A partner in philanthropy

Making it easy for donors to give and informing them about programs that are working

A civic leader and convener

Sponsoring special initiatives, convening people to discuss civic issues and working in partnership with other organizations to meet community needs

Social Capital in Boston: Findings from the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey

A Special Report of The Boston Foundation
2001

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Preface

Civic life in Boston has changed dramatically over the last decade. We have seen neighborhood residents work together in partnership with public agencies and community based organizations to reduce crime and rebuild their communities. Several neighborhoods have made impressive gains and in some cases experienced true revivals.

Over this same time period, the Boston Foundation has worked side-by-side with numerous organizations and individuals to learn more about our city and its residents. In 1989, TBF released *In the Midst of Plenty*, the first qualitative study of poverty in Boston, which was followed by focus groups held in many communities and in seven different languages.

In 2000, the Foundation, in concert with numerous other groups, developed the *Boston Children and Families Database*, which can be used to access many types of data about this city's neighborhoods. Also in 2000, in partnership with the City of Boston and hundreds of participants, we released *The Wisdom of Our Choices: Indicators of Progress, Change and Sustainability*, possibly the most ambitious information-gathering effort ever undertaken by a major city.

Because of the Foundation's commitment to understanding and improving the quality of life in Boston, we responded favorably in 1999, when Robert Putnam approached us about participating in a national study of "social capital." In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Dr. Putnam suggests that social capital, a term which describes the benefits of the ways in which human beings connect with one another, is an essential ingredient not only for interpersonal relationships but for entire communities. He argues that social capital has decreased in recent years, in small and large ways, and in communities across the country.

With the goal of learning more about social capital in America, 40 community foundations from across the country, including the Boston Foundation, participated in the *Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey* in the Fall of 2000. The survey captured rich details about civic behavior across a wide spectrum of communities and it provides a baseline for future measurements.

In Boston, we discovered that we have tremendous strengths in the areas of interpersonal tolerance and involvement in neighborhood associations, politics and the arts. We also learned that important work remains to be done, including improving social trust and reducing barriers so that newcomers and all ethnic groups feel full inclusion in the civic process.

If there was any question about the importance of social capital in Boston or in other communities across America, the events of September 11th 2001 answered it. There has never been a more poignant demonstration of the *power* of social capital than the responses of New Yorkers and millions of other Americans to the terrorist attacks of September 11th. If social capital was lying dormant in America, it was reawakened as soon as people understood how necessary it was to pull together.

We are optimistic that the findings of the study, here in Boston and in other places across the country, will help us all to strengthen the kinds of community connections that are so important to our common future.

In these pages, you will find a brief summary of the findings from the Boston study. We thank the authors, Terry Saunders Lane, Director of Policy, Research and Evaluation at the Boston Foundation, and Douglas Currivan, Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, for their careful and thoughtful analysis. As part of the work to interpret and present the findings, a number of colleagues provided guidance and suggestions. We gratefully acknowledge Boston Foundation staff (Angel Bermudez, Annette Fernie, Kate Guedj, Satoko Kishi Hesp, Barbara Hindley, Mori Insinger, Charlotte Kahn, Ann Kurkjian, Catherine Leak, Ann McQueen, Cindy Rizzo, Bob Wadsworth, Richard Ward) as well as Robert Putnam, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; Dana Ansel, MassINC; Kate Canfield, Canfield Design; Jack Fowler, Center for Survey Research, University of Massachusetts-Boston; Hubie Jones, Office of the Chancellor, University of Massachusetts-Boston; Mary Jo Marion and Andres Torres, Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, University of Massachusetts-Boston; George McCully; Steven Minicucci, Consortium on Financing Higher Education; and Tom Sander, Saguaro Seminar, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.



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Introduction

Neighbors get together for weekly meals, sponsor block parties and tend community gardens. Arts organizations sponsor festivals attended by local residents. Voters campaign for candidates and go to the polls, even for municipal elections. Adults become mentors to inner-city youth. Strangers reach out to one another in a time of crisis.

These kinds of activities and connections are examples of “social capital,” a term made popular by Dr. Robert D. Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* published by Simon and Schuster in 2000.

The basic premise of social capital is that social networks have tremendous value for communities; and that a variety of benefits directly flow from them, including trust, reciprocity, mutual cooperation and the sharing of important information. Further, it is held that these networks benefit not only those individuals directly participating in them, but virtually everyone in a community.

Ultimately, social capital describes the very fabric of our connections with each other, connections which Putnam maintains have declined over the last quarter of a century, increasingly distancing people from our democratic structures, communities, neighborhoods, friends and even family.

The Boston Foundation, like other community foundations across the country, has been in the business of promoting the development of social capital for many years. As a community foundation, the Foundation has a special responsibility to support a broad range of activities in Greater Boston that strengthen the fabric of the community. Through its grantmaking, the Foundation focuses on creating opportunities for children, youth, adults and families; building bridges among people and organizations; and encouraging the connections between people that enable them to engage fully in civic life.

In 1999, the Boston Foundation joined with 39 other community foundations across the country to conduct a survey of social capital in each of their communities. The goal was to provide a baseline measure of community involvement that can be used to track changes over time. In Boston, as in many other cities, the survey has the potential to contribute to an ongoing civic agenda that reinforces existing social capital and develops strategies to address the challenges this community faces.

The Survey

The survey was designed by Dr. Robert D. Putnam, Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. With a team of researchers and the advice of experts from across the country, Dr. Putnam tested key assumptions about social capital based on his previous research.

One assumption was that social bonds have both private and public benefits, and that the health, life satisfaction and financial gains of individuals can be enhanced when people assist one another. For example, job seekers often turn to their "networks" for help, thus drawing on social capital as well their own human capital (education and skills) in their employment searches.

Another assumption was that local networks are critical to the positive functioning of communities. When neighbors organize to tackle a common problem, their collective wisdom, action and influence can achieve more than their individual efforts. For instance, social capital is evident when citizens vote in elections to shape the direction of civic life or when they offer their time and money to help those in need.

In order to explore these assumptions and examples of social capital, the survey was designed to measure levels of trust, friendship and tolerance in the communities involved. It also explored various types of community involvement, such as participation in politics, community groups, the arts, faith-based organizations, volunteering and philanthropy.

Summary of Findings for Boston

The 40 sites included in the study represented a wide range of geographic areas across the United States, including rural, suburban and urban communities. Boston was one of the few urban settings that only surveyed residents of a city and excluded areas surrounding the urban core. (See page 16 for a list of sites).

In Boston, the survey was conducted with 600 respondents who lived within the city limits. It included an over-sample of 200 interviews in four neighborhoods to increase the number of Hispanic respondents. All data were weighted to reflect both the correct probability of selection for each respondent and the actual demographic mix in each community (based on 1990 census data). As a result, some interviews were weighted “down” and others were weighted “up” to make the balance of demographic characteristics in the sample more closely resemble their actual distribution in the city. The weighted racial distribution for Boston was non-Hispanic white: 50%; black: 23%; Hispanic: 12%; Asian: 9%; and other: 6%. [1]

Charts 1 and 2 display the rankings for Boston compared to the 39 other survey sites. The study team recognized that it was inappropriate to compare raw results across sites that were quite different on the major factors that affect social capital outcomes. Therefore, for each of the communities, scores were created to account for the differences that were

important predictors of social capital. The key factors included racial and ethnic composition of the community, educational achievement of residents, age distribution of residents and the percentage of residents living in an urban area. [2]

The charts reveal that Boston had numerous strengths which contributed to a wealth of social capital as well as considerable challenges to building social capital.

Two types of social capital indicators are presented in the charts, including community-level activities and interpersonal relationships.

At the community level, Boston ranked among the top six sites on:

- conventional politics (voting, interest and knowledge of politics);
- political activism (signing a petition, attending political meetings, participating in a demonstration, participating in civil rights organization);
- involvement with neighbors to fix things in a community; and
- participation in the arts.

However, Boston scored at or close to the bottom of the sites on charitable giving and volunteering and on involvement with faith organizations (membership, attendance at worship services and/or participation in other religious activities).

[1] Throughout the report, the term “Hispanic” is used to refer to those who identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Thirty-three percent of the Hispanic respondents said that they were white, 19% said they were black, and 47% identified themselves as “other race.” The Hispanic respondents were Puerto Rican (28%), Mexican (11%), Cuban (10%), or “other” (50%– Dominican, Central American). The term “black” refers to those who identified themselves as non-Hispanic blacks, such as African-Americans, Haitians and Africans. The term “white” includes those who identified themselves as non-Hispanic whites. The sample also included individuals who identified themselves as Asian, but the number of responses was so small in Boston that no in depth analyses are reported here.

[2] To facilitate reasonable comparisons across different communities throughout the country, the responses on many questions were standardized into scores called “Community Quotients.” These Community Quotients (CQs) provide a standard score in which the average for all communities equals 100 points, and one standard deviation from this mean is equal to 15 points. So scores below 85 (100 – 15) can be viewed as “below average” and scores above 115 can be viewed as “above average.” In addition, several indices (e.g. social trust, political participation, faith-based involvement) were developed by combining answers from several questions.

Social Capital in Boston

Rankings are based on 1=highest and 40=lowest rank

CHART 1
Community Involvement Indicators

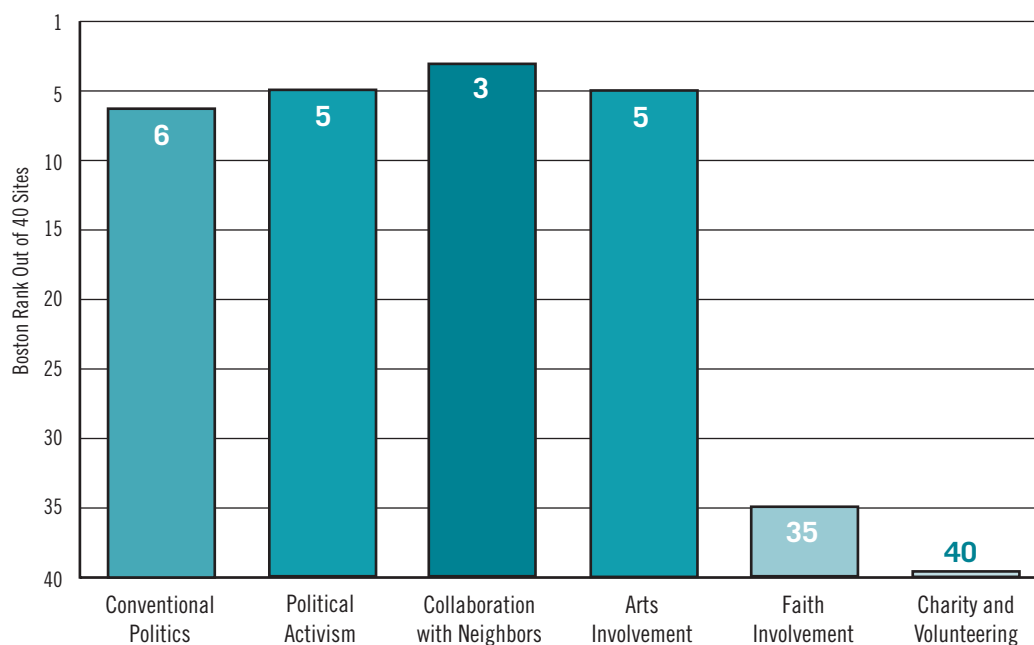
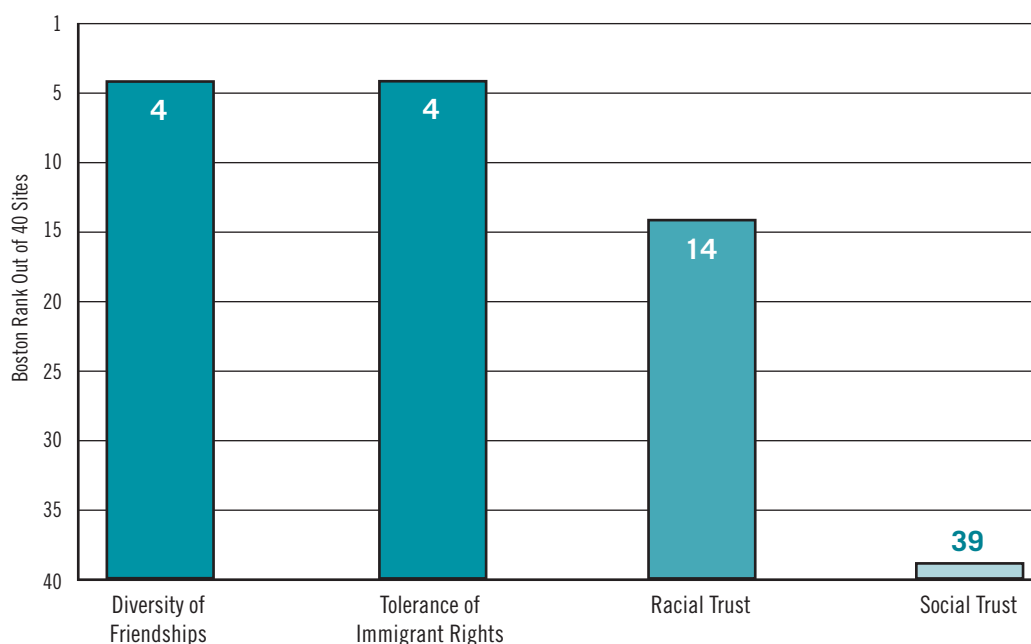


CHART 2
Indicators of Interpersonal Relationships



In the area of interpersonal relationships, Boston scored fourth on both “tolerance of immigrant rights” and “diversity of friendships” (across racial, class and sexual orientation differences). However, it ranked 39th in the area of social trust (trust in neighbors, co-workers, shopkeepers, fellow worshippers and police).

On a number of dimensions, black and white respondents had similar levels of community involvement. They were equally likely to work with their neighbors on community issues, sign petitions and belong to faith organizations. In contrast, Hispanic respondents were less likely than whites or blacks to take part in those activities. All three ethnic groups were equally likely to participate in the arts. Interpersonally, blacks and Hispanics displayed lower levels of social trust than whites.

The Boston Context

Boston, like all communities, has a set of special cultural and demographic characteristics that contribute to an understanding of the survey findings. For example, some groups that are generally acknowledged to have higher rates of civic participation, regardless of where they live, were over-represented among Boston respondents (See Table 1). These included people with educational levels beyond high school and those earning incomes of \$75,000 or more. Because of their high level of personal resources, these individuals often were more likely to pursue community involvement.

However, other groups that are generally found to have lower rates of civic participation were also over-represented among Boston respondents. These groups included:

- **People under the age of 35.** This group included large numbers of students who typically had relatively short-term and weak connections to the communities where they attended college or post secondary school.
- **New residents of the community** (those who had lived in Boston for five years or less). These individuals were often found to be less connected to their neighbors and to their communities. The new arrivals in Boston included many different types of people, such as college students, young professionals, immigrants from other countries and/or high-income workers arriving for new technology jobs.
- **Hispanic residents.** These residents were more likely to be young and relatively new residents of the city and to face more linguistic barriers than their black or white counterparts. This meant that civic involvement was less common and often more difficult for them.
- **Non-U.S. citizens.** These respondents were unable to participate in electoral politics and less likely to participate in protest activities or to collaborate with their neighbors on community activities. They reported lower levels of social trust and lower levels of social connections (not only in Boston, but across the country).

TABLE 1

Demographic Differences between Boston and National Samples

Demographic Characteristics	Boston Sample	National Sample
More than a high school education	70%	58%
Annual income of \$75,000 or more	25%	17%
Under age 35	38%	32%
Lived in Boston for five years or less	38%	30%
Hispanic residents	12%	9%
Non-U.S. citizens	12%	8%

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the ways in which some of these demographic groups differed on selected measures of social capital. The highlights of these variations are described in the discussion that follows.

TABLE 2
Social Capital Patterns Among Key Demographic Groups in Boston

Social Capital Measures	Not a U.S. Citizen	Lived < 5 Years in Community	Age <35	Income Level >\$75,000	Education Level > High School
COMMUNITY LEVEL INDICATORS					
Voted in 1996 election	N.E.	–	–	N.S.	+
Signed a petition	–	N.S.	–	+	+
Worked with neighbors to fix something	–	–	–	+	+
Participated in arts activities	N.S.	+	+	N.S.	+
Member of faith organization	N.S.	–	–	N.S.	N.S.
Gave \$ to religious organizations	N.S.	–	–	+	N.S.
Gave \$ to non-religious organizations	–	+	N.S.	+	+
Volunteered	N.S.	+	+	+	+
Had barriers to community involvement	N.S.	+	+	N.S.	+
INTERPERSONAL SOCIAL CAPITAL INDICATORS					
Tolerance for rights of immigrants	N.S.	+	+	+	+
Social trust (trust in neighbors, co-workers, fellow worshippers, shopkeepers, police)	–	N.S.	N.S.	+	+
Racial trust (trust of other racial groups)	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.	+	+
Social connections (had people to confide in)	–	N.S.	N.S.	+	+

N.E. = not eligible to vote N.S. = no significant difference + = positive association – = negative association

Each demographic characteristic is dichotomized for this analysis. For example, the first column compares non-citizens to citizens.

All associations are based on pairwise correlation coefficients, with statistical significance determined at the .05 level.

TABLE 3
Social Capital Patterns Across Major Ethnic Groups in Boston

Social Capital Measures	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic (any race)	Non-Hispanic White
Voted in 1996 election (eligible to vote)	69% ^{h w}	44% ^{b w}	81% ^{b h}
Signed a petition	45% ^h	20% ^{b w}	49% ^h
Worked with neighbors to fix something	43% ^h	14% ^{b w}	45% ^h
Participated in arts activities	39%	29%	40%
Access to Internet at home	56%	50% ^w	63% ^h
Had barriers to community involvement	40%	53%	43%
Had social connections (2 or more people to confide in)	92% ^h	77% ^{b w}	91% ^h
Tolerant of immigrants' rights	68% ^h	54% ^{b w}	74% ^h
Above average social trust score	28% ^w	33% ^w	64% ^{b h}
Above average racial trust score	12% ^{h w}	26% ^b	29% ^b
Member of faith organization	60% ^h	39% ^{b w}	63% ^h
Gave money to religious organizations	73% ^{h w}	52% ^b	59% ^b
Gave money to non-religious organizations	64% ^{h w}	39% ^{b w}	76% ^{b h}
Volunteered in last 12 months	43%	32% ^w	51% ^h

^b = significantly different from black residents ^h = significantly different from Hispanic residents
^w = significantly different from white residents

Significant differences across ethnic groups are based upon mean comparisons with statistical test criteria set to the conventional probability level of alpha = .05 or less.

The Good News: Boston's Strengths

INTEREST/ACTIVISM IN POLITICS Bostonians demonstrated strong interest in conventional politics. Sixty-eight percent of Boston respondents scored high or medium on an index of interest in electoral politics, compared to 63% of the national sample. [3] (The index included interest in politics/national affairs, voting and familiarity with government officials.) Compared to the 40 sites in the study, Boston ranked sixth on this indicator.

When political activism was surveyed, Boston respondents scored fifth out of the 40 sites. Three-fifths (60%) of Boston respondents scored high or medium on an index that measured whether they had signed a petition, attended a political rally or participated in a demonstration, civil rights organization or public interest group over the previous year. A little more than half (53%) of the national respondents had similar scores.

Longer-term residents, older people and highly educated respondents were more likely to have voted in the 1996 national election. Whites were more likely than blacks or Hispanics to have voted at that time.

NEIGHBORHOOD INVOLVEMENT Bostonians were more likely than their national counterparts to work with their neighbors to “fix something.” Two-fifths (41%) of the Boston respondents said they had been involved in fixing a neighborhood problem, compared to one-third (32%) of the respondents in the national sample. Boston ranked third in the country on this issue.

Longer-term residents, older people, wealthier and highly educated respondents were more likely to collaborate with their neighbors.

On a number of dimensions, the black and white respondents in Boston showed similar patterns of neighborhood involvement. For example, both were just as likely to report that they had worked with neighbors to “fix something” (45% of whites and 43% of blacks). Both thought their neighborhood “provided a sense of community” (81% of whites and 84% of blacks). In addition, both showed similar levels of involvement in neighborhood associations (28% of whites and 27% of blacks). When income and education (key predictors of overall civic involvement), were controlled, black respondents were even more likely than whites to say that they had worked on community projects.

ACTIVISM IN THE ARTS As was true across the country, close to three-fourths of all Bostonians attended community celebrations, parades and other events. In Boston, people of different income levels and ethnicity were equally likely to attend such events. That finding reflected the vibrant and diverse cultural life that existed in neighborhoods across the city.

However, Bostonians were more likely to *participate* in the arts than those in the national sample. One-fourth (24%) of Boston respondents reported taking part in artistic activities with a group (such as singing, dancing or acting), compared to 17% of national respondents. Of the 40 sites, Boston placed fifth in this area.

In addition, it was found that arts participation attracted people who were not typically involved in other forms of civic engagement. Arts participation was more common among those who were relatively new arrivals in the city – as well as younger residents.

Bostonians also were more likely to volunteer for arts organizations – close to one-fifth of Boston respondents did so, compared to about one-tenth of national respondents. Boston ranked second among all of the sites on this measure.

[3] Unless otherwise noted, comparisons between Boston and national results reflect differences of at least one standard error.

Arts participation was correlated with active civic participation of other types, such as voting and involvement with neighbors. Given the egalitarian nature of arts participation, that pattern suggests that efforts to encourage connections to the arts may have positive effects in other arenas of social capital.

SOCIAL NETWORKS Overall, Bostonians as well as those in the national sample, had numerous linkages to other people, thus setting the stage for the social networks that are needed to create greater social capital in the future. Therefore, social isolation was not an issue for most respondents. For example, 90% of Bostonians had two or more people with whom they could share confidences or discuss difficult decisions. Boston scored well on this issue, ranking sixth among all the sites. However, social isolation was more widespread among those with lower incomes and lower levels of education. Hispanic respondents reported more isolation as well, with fewer people (77%) reporting two or more people to confide in than blacks (92%) or whites (91%).

TOLERANCE, DIVERSITY OF FRIENDSHIPS AND RACIAL TRUST Interpersonal tolerance, friendship with people of different types of backgrounds, and inter-racial trust are important building blocks of social capital. In these areas, the responses of Bostonians showed considerable strengths. For example, support for immigrants' rights and diverse friendships were reported to be at high levels. Seventy percent of Bostonians supported immigrants' efforts to achieve rights, compared to 56% of national respondents. Bostonians were more likely to have friends of different races, economic classes and/or sexual orientation than was true elsewhere. On both of these dimensions, Boston was fourth of all the sites.

On an index of general racial trust (measured as the degree one trusts people who are white, Hispanic,

black or Asian), Boston ranked 14th. More than 80% of respondents said that they trusted each of these groups "a lot" or "some." A number of the sites that ranked quite high on racial trust had relatively low ethnic or racial diversity in their communities, so respondent views about inter-racial relationships may be different than in more diverse communities. For this reason, Boston's score was also compared to the other cities that had at least one-third people of color. In that analysis, Boston ranked third out of the 13 ethnically diverse urban areas in the sample, scoring higher on racial trust than most comparable sites.

In Boston, racial trust increased with income and education, and overall whites and Hispanics expressed higher levels of racial trust than did blacks. While more than one-fourth of whites and Hispanics expressed a high level of racial trust, only 12% of blacks did so.

ACCESS TO AND USE OF INTERNET The Internet is considered to be an arena in which social connections can be made, so the survey explored the extent to which respondents had access to the "net". Three-fifths (60%) of Bostonians said they had access to the Internet at home, compared to 55% of the national sample. Boston ranked 20th of all of the sites – placing it in the middle of the range. [4]

As was true across all of the sites, the "digital divide" was evident in Boston, as reflected in the wide variation in Internet access across income, age and educational groups. Whites and blacks reported similar levels of access, but Hispanics were less likely to have the Internet available in their homes. However, ethnic differences are reduced when income was taken into account. For example, 76% of blacks and Hispanics with incomes above \$50,000 had home Internet access, higher than the rate for whites at that income level (70%).

[4] The findings from the Social Capital survey suggest that Internet access has improved considerably in recent years. A comparable survey showed that only 37% of Bostonians had Internet access in 1998. However, the two surveys were not directly comparable, so the enormous level of increase may be overstated.

Challenges for Boston

BARRIERS TO CIVIC PARTICIPATION About half (47%) of the Boston respondents felt that they had encountered barriers to becoming involved in their communities. In this regard, Boston was about average, ranking 19th of the 40 sites. Occupational barriers (e.g. long hours at work and/or lack of adequate child care) were the most common obstacles in Boston as well as nationally. These barriers were mentioned by two-fifths (41%) of Bostonians.

Bostonians were somewhat more likely to identify other barriers to community involvement than was true elsewhere. Close to 40% of Bostonians felt that they lacked information about how to get involved, compared to 31% of national respondents. Furthermore, almost 30% said that they did not participate in community activities because they felt unwelcome, compared to 22% of national respondents.

Several groups were especially likely to identify barriers. They included new residents and young people. Those respondents with greater than a high school education and those with higher incomes (above \$75,000) were particularly likely to report work-related obstacles. In addition, Hispanic respondents were more likely (53%) than blacks (39%) or whites (43%) to report barriers of any kind and they especially mentioned occupational and informational obstacles. [5]

Clearly, the complex reasons underlying the barriers for Hispanics merit further exploration. For example, these findings may partially reflect the fact that a substantial percentage of the Hispanic respondents

(34%) were not U.S. citizens, compared to 13% of black respondents and only 5% of whites. In addition, more of the Hispanic respondents were relatively new residents in Boston. Almost half (46%) had lived in the city for five years or less, compared to about one-third of the white and black respondents.

In recent decades, Boston has witnessed a substantial growth in both the number and diversity of residents from a variety of Spanish-speaking locations (e.g., Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico and Central America). Some have longstanding familial and community connections with their homelands, and still travel to them frequently. In addition, because the community is so diverse, there is no single “Hispanic community” to offer support and involvement opportunities. Finally, Hispanic respondents tended to have lower incomes than non-Hispanics in the sample. [6] All of these factors were associated with lower levels of civic involvement, regardless of ethnicity.

LEADERSHIP IN NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS

Boston was weaker than other sites on an index of local leadership (attending meetings of groups or associations and serving in leadership roles in them). Only 15% of respondents had engaged in this type of civic leadership in the previous year (compared to 17% of national respondents). Despite the relatively small percentage difference between Boston and national respondents, Boston ranked 35th of all of the sites.

SOCIAL TRUST Putnam’s prior work suggests that interpersonal social trust emerges when social networks are strong [7] and that social trust is a key precursor to the development of social capital. [8] In the current study, social trust was defined as a

[5] These differences were not statistically significant at the .05 level, but that is likely due to the low number of Hispanic respondents.

[6] These patterns are consistent with findings in other studies and reports about the Hispanic/Latino population (Andres Torres and Lisa Chavez, “Latinos in Massachusetts: An Update,” Boston, MA: The Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, University of Massachusetts Boston, 1998; Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy, “Latino Agenda 2000,” Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, 2000).

[7] Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community”, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000, p. 19.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 134-137.

composite of trust in people (neighbors, fellow worshippers, co-workers) and one institution (police). [9] In Boston, the overall level of social trust was lower than in most other sites. On this index, Boston was tied with four other sites at second from the bottom, because fewer respondents in Boston than elsewhere said they trusted others “a lot.” For example, 49% of the national respondents said that they trusted their neighbors “a lot” compared to 29% of those from Boston. However, when those who trusted others “some” were added to those who trusted “a lot,” the scores for Boston were only slightly lower (77%) than those for all national respondents (83%).

In Boston, people with higher incomes and education were more trusting than those with lower incomes and education. Black and Hispanic respondents expressed lower levels of social trust than whites. For example, 85% of whites said they trusted their neighbors “some” or “a lot” compared to 74% of blacks and 57% of Hispanics. Blacks were more likely to express concern about being treated “as though they were dishonest” than whites or Hispanics. Two-fifths of blacks said that this issue had been a problem for them, compared to a little more than one-quarter of Hispanics (29%) and whites (27%).

Somewhat contrary to the overall theory about the relationship between social trust and social capital, social trust was not always a prerequisite for civic involvement in Boston. It was not correlated with some of the key measures of civic engagement (voting, political activism or working with one’s neighbors) – and only modestly correlated with charitable giving.

CHARITY AND VOLUNTEERING Overall, rates of charitable giving and philanthropy in Boston were lower than elsewhere. On a scale that ranked communities in the study on “giving and volunteering,” Boston placed last among all of the sites.

Two-thirds of Boston respondents said they made donations to non-religious charities – a pattern similar to other sites. Such donations were most common among whites and those with higher incomes and greater than a high school education. However, the level of generosity was lower in Boston than elsewhere. In addition, the percentage of Bostonians who made financial gifts to religious causes (63%) was lower than the national sample (70%) and the amount of those donations was lower as well.

INVOLVEMENT WITH FAITH ORGANIZATIONS

Although a vast majority of Bostonians indicated that they had religious preferences (82%), they tended to be less directly involved with faith organizations than people from the other sites. Overall, Boston ranked low on an index of faith involvement that included church membership, church service attendance, non-religious service church participation and affiliation with non-church religious groups. [10] On this item, Boston ranked 35th among the 40 sites. This pattern may be partially reflective of a regional tradition of secularity.

Hispanic respondents (90%) were more likely than whites (82%) or blacks (83%) to report some religious preference. In addition, 39% of Hispanics attended services every week, compared to 27% of blacks and 29% of whites. On the other hand, only 39% of Hispanics were members of specific faith organizations or religious communities, in contrast to 59% of blacks and 63% of whites. New residents, young people and those with lower levels of education were less likely to report belonging to a faith community.

In Boston, faith involvement was not a strong predictor of all forms of civic involvement. It did not correlate with measures of civic engagement such as voting, political activism or working with one’s neighbors. However, it was linked to higher levels of charitable giving.

[9] Other institutions such as local government and the media were not included in the index. On these individual items, blacks and Hispanics expressed lower levels of trust.

[10] For simplicity sake, the word “church” is used here to mean any place of worship.

Implications for the Future

Boston enters the 21st century with a diverse and dynamic population that has created a wealth of social capital. It is expressed through active citizen engagement at the local level and through connections with neighbors, acquaintances and friends. Social capital, however, needs continuous nourishment from individuals and institutions. The events of September 11, 2001 and the local responses to this national tragedy highlight the importance of building and maintaining community connections.

The Social Capital Community Benchmark survey provides a baseline for examining our strengths and challenges in this area. While Boston ranked high on numerous measures, such as political and neighborhood involvement, participation in the arts and tolerance and diversity of friendships, certain aspects of social capital need to be strengthened. For example, political participation must be improved through programs that increase voting among disenfranchised groups, such as Hispanic residents and new arrivals to the city. And, although numerous informal neighborhood associations exist throughout the city, they need ongoing support and the enhancement of local leadership to maintain their vitality.

One area that has tremendous potential to build social capital in Boston is involvement in the arts, because it offers a means of community connection for those who are just arriving in the city and for people with a variety of income levels and ethnic backgrounds. The arts can serve as an arena for developing connections within and across communities, and they can strengthen other forms of civic involvement.

The survey results also present some critical challenges for the people of Boston. For instance, helping new residents to access and build social capital emerged as a key issue. New arrivals have always been essential to the health and growth of the city, yet special attention is needed to remove obstacles to civic involvement. Hispanics identified barriers to political participation and neighborhood involvement that need close examination and a new level of concerted response. And, since low social trust and problems of discrimination also surfaced as significant challenges for the future, renewed and sustained efforts must be made that will build new levels of trust among people of diverse backgrounds.

Finally, since volunteering and charitable giving ranked so low in Boston, it is critical that there be increased local efforts to educate people about the importance of giving. A new movement to encourage philanthropy and volunteerism is called for as Boston works to build on its social capital strengths.

Survey Methodology

Telephone interviews were conducted by Taylor Nelson Sofres Intersearch Corporation between July 2000 and November 2000, using random digit dialing. The sample consisted of 26,200 respondents in 40 communities plus a national sample of 3,000 respondents. The national sample included an over sample of Hispanics and blacks to assure that sufficient numbers of people from these demographic groups would be included in the study. Each community sample included at least 500 interviews, and each local sponsor decided what geographical area to cover.

Various types of communities participated in the study, including inner cities, suburbs and large sections of states. Boston was the only large city from the Northeast in the sample. The communities can be clustered in regions as follows:

East: Boston, Massachusetts
Central Maine
Delaware
New Hampshire
Rochester, New York
Syracuse, New York
York, Pennsylvania

South: Atlanta, Georgia
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Birmingham, Alabama
East Tennessee
Greensboro, North Carolina
Houston, Texas
Kanawha, West Virginia
Winston-Salem, North Carolina
Counties in North and South Carolina

Central: Bismarck, North Dakota
Boulder, Colorado
Chicago, Illinois
Cincinnati, Ohio
Cleveland, Ohio
Denver, Colorado
Detroit, Michigan
Grand Rapids, Michigan
Indiana
Kalamazoo, Michigan
Miner County, South Dakota
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Montana
Newaygo County, Michigan
North Minneapolis, Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota

West: Bend, Oregon
Los Angeles, California
Phoenix, Arizona
San Diego, California
San Francisco, California
Seattle, Washington
Silicon Valley, California
Yakima County, Washington
(Hawaii – not included in national data base)

In Boston, the response rate was 28% (compared to a national response rate of 27%). The response rate refers to the number of completed interviews as a percentage of potentially eligible respondents (those who were eligible + those whose eligibility could not be determined). The cooperation rate in Boston was 42%, identical to that for the national sample. This rate refers to the percentage of eligible respondents who agreed to participate in the survey and who completed interviews.

This report is a summary of some of the key Boston findings. Readers who would like more detail about social capital in Boston may request the full report by contacting the Boston Foundation at 617-338-1700.

Those who are interested in the national study or wish to conduct analyses themselves should visit the website, www.bettertogether.org. At that site is a summary of the national findings, data about each of the sites in the sample, and guidance about how to obtain the full database.



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